

STATUS OF WOMEN IN BUDDHISM

By Ven. Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda



he social attitude towards women has been marked by discrimination backed by prejudices as well as religious bias. Thus, discrimination against women is undoubtedly a common feature in all societies. The prejudices and obstacles faced by women are similar be it in Africa, Asia, America, or Europe. It is a peculiar disability experienced by women and has its basis in religious bias. It is from religion then that the concept of a woman's basic disability originated. Here, she is depicted as a temptress and she is invariably warned against in most of the religions of the world.

Some social bias is based on popular beliefs. According to certain religious myths, man was introduced as the son of God. The strange thing is woman has never been given a similar status as the daughter of God.

Amongst the group of soul-believers, there are those

who hold the notion that a soul exists only in man but not in woman. Those who claim that woman has a soul would not give credence that her soul could ever find a place in heaven after her death. These are some of the strange beliefs which show clearly the nature of the discrimination against women which is prevalent in the world.

Women have been attributed the worst qualities of mankind. They are regarded as the source of all the sins of the world, even to the extent of being blamed for the misfortunes that men face in this world and as well as in the next!

Rites and Rituals

Among certain religious cults, women are barred from practising certain rites and rituals on the basis of their being merely a woman! At one time, they were even prohibited from reading the scriptures! Their punishment for doing so was to have their tongues cut out. Apart from that, they were also discouraged from entering places of worship. Even if they were allowed to participate in religious practices, such participation was only confined within their own homes, pertaining to household religious ceremonies. At present, even though many barriers have been removed, these hindrances and obstructions in the light of moral and spiritual upliftment of women still exists in varying degrees.

Demarcation between Man and Woman

Historically, the social attitude towards women can be traced back into pre-Buddhist days from the early Vedic literature; for instance, the Rigveda. There is evidence indicating the honour and respect which women formerly received in their homes. From the religious angle, they also had access to the highest knowledge of the Absolute or Brahma. However, this liberal attitude changed in the course of time. This is due to the influence and the dominance of the priests with their ritualistic practices like priestcraft and animal sacrifices – to name a few. The scriptures were then given new interpretations, and women came to be considered inferior to men – both physically and mentally.

This demarcation between man and woman is manifested in the social and domestic sphere where woman is seen as comparatively inferior. For instance, a woman is looked down upon as a mere possession or as an object. Her place was in the home, and she was subjected to the whims and fancies of her husband. She not only had to perform all the domestic chores, but also to bring up a large family. For example, some of the Brahmins married and lived with their wives, and yet regarded the food cooked by women as impure and as unfit to eat! From instances like these, a myth was built up. Women were being stigmatized as sinful, and it was thought that the only way to keep them out of mischief was to have them endlessly occupied with the task of motherhood and various domestic duties.

There was a strong belief that there must be a male child for the continuance of the family line and the performance of the 'rites of the ancestors'. The traditional belief was that only a son could carry out such rituals which were thought to be necessary for bringing peace and security to his father and grandfather after their deaths. Otherwise, it was believed that the departed ones may return as ghosts to harass the family. Therefore, the ability to produce a son was very important to a married woman. On the other hand, if a married woman had no child, or if she had failed to produce any male offspring, she might be superseded by a second or third wife – or even be turned out of the house according to this belief! Viewed from the angle of the importance attached to the birth of a son to a married woman, we know that the life of a married woman was uncertain, depending on whether she could produce any son or not! Yet this does not mean that the lives of unmarried women were any less uncertain than their married sisters. Marriage was therefore considered a holy sacrament. Thus, a young girl who did not marry was despised by society and held as the object of their criticism.

Spiritually, in the field of religious practices, the position which women once enjoyed was also denied them. Accordingly, it was believed that a woman was incapable of reaching heaven through her own merits. Furthermore, she could not worship by herself. It was also believed that she could only reach heaven through unquestioning obedience to her husband – even if the

husband in question happened to be a wicked person. It was also accepted that the food left over by her husband was often the food for her. These examples show the extent of the inequality between man and woman.

As It Is Stated By the Buddha

By contrast to such bigoted practices that hinder spiritual development, Buddhism can be claimed to be the least discriminatory in attitudes towards women. There is no doubt at all that the Buddha was the first religious teacher who gave women equal and unfettered opportunities in the field of spiritual development. Although He had on several occasions pointed out the natural tendencies and weaknesses of women in general, He also gave due credit to their abilities and capabilities. He truly paved the way for women to lead a full religious life. This implied that they were equally able to develop and purify their minds and realise the bliss of Nibbana as well as men. This fact is amply proven by the testimonies of the *Theris* (Nuns) during the Buddha's time.

The teachings of the Buddha did a great deal to wipe off numerous superstitious beliefs and meaningless rites and rituals – which also included sacrifices – from the minds of many people. When the Buddha revealed the true nature of life and death, and explained the natural phenomena which govern the universe to these people, they began to understand. This subsequently arrested and corrected the prevailing social injustices and prejudices. Thus it enabled women to lead their own way

of life.

Although the Buddha had elevated the status of women socially, He also pointed out the social and psychological differences that exist between men and women. This was shown in the manner in which He was realistic in His observations. His advice, given from time to time, seen in the light of His observations was practical. These many instances were clearly depicted in the *Anguttara Nikaya* and *Samyutta Nikaya*. It was mentioned that a man's duty is his unending quest for knowledge. He should improve and stabilize his skills and craftsmanship, and be dedicated to his work. He must also be able to find the means to maintain and sustain his family. On the other hand, it was also stated that it was the woman's duty to look after her home and her husband.

The *Anguttara Nikaya* contains valuable advice which the Buddha had given to young girls prior to their marriage. Forseeing the difficulties that will arise with the new in-laws, the Buddha advised the girls to give every respect to their parents-in-law, serving them as lovingly as they were their own parents. They were also requested to honour and respect their husband's relatives and friends so that a congenial and happy atmosphere will be created in their new homes. They were advised to study and understand their husband's nature, ascertain their husband's activities, character and temperament, and to be useful and co-operative at all times in their new homes. They should be polite, kind

and watchful in their relationship with the servants. They should also safeguard their husband's earnings and ascertain that all household expenditure was economically maintained. Such is the timeless quality of the Buddha's advice.

The Buddha appreciated that peace and harmony in a home is to a great extent ensured by a woman. Thus, His advice to women on their role in their married life was realistic and practical. He listed a good number of day-to-day qualities which a woman should or should not emulate. On diverse occasions, the Buddha advised that a wife:—

- should not harbour evil thoughts against her husband;
- should not be cruel, harsh or domineering;
- should not be a spendthrift but should be economical and live within her means;
- should zealously guard and save her husband's property and hard-earned wealth;
- should always be virtuous and chaste in mind and action;
- should be faithful and harbour no thoughts of any adulterous acts;
- should be refined in speech and polite in action;
- should be kind, industrious and hard-working;
- should be thoughtful and compassionate towards her husband and her attitude should equate that of a mother loving and protecting her son;

- should be modest and respectful;
- should be cool, calm and understanding – serving not only as a wife but also as a friend and adviser to her husband when the need arises.

In the days of the Buddha, other religious teachers had also spoken on the duties and obligations of a wife towards her husband. They stressed that it is the particular duty of a wife to bear an off-spring for the husband, and render him faithful service and to provide conjugal happiness. This is a similar view shared by Confucianism. However, although the duties of a wife towards the husband were laid down in the Confucian code of discipline, it did not stress the duties and obligations of the husband towards the wife. The teachings of the Buddha was not as biased towards the husbands. In the *Sigalovada Sutta*, the Buddha had explicitly stated both the duties of the husband towards the wife and vice versa. On the part of the husband, he should be faithful, courteous and not despising. It is the husband's duty to hand over authority to his wife; and from time to time, provide her with adornments. Thus, we witness the unbiased attitude shown by the Buddha towards both men and women.

The Buddha had also indicated various handicaps and drawbacks a woman had to undergo. For instance, the trials and tribulations a woman had to bear in the agony of leaving her family on the day of her marriage and the trauma of accommodating herself in a new environment

fraught with problems and difficulties. Added to these are the physiological pain and suffering which a woman is subjected to during her menstrual periods, pregnancy and child-birth. All these are but natural phenomena which depicts only the differential handicaps and circumstances prevailing between a man and a woman.

The Buddha's teachings on the real nature of life and death – of karma and samsaric wanderings – changed social attitudes towards women during that period. This is especially so with regard to the greater importance attached to the birth of a son. Buddhism never shared the brahmin's view that a son was essential for the father's passage to heaven. The Buddha taught that according to the Law of Karma, one is responsible for one's own action and its consequence. The well-being of a father or grandfather does not depend upon the action of the son or the grandson. Each individual is responsible for its own actions. Therefore, there was no cause for the married women to be anxious just because they could not produce sons just for the sake of performing the "rites of the ancestors". This also meant that daughters became quite as good as sons.

It was possible, in the early Buddhist period for a girl to remain unmarried, and yet unabused. She could be contented at her home and adequately occupied in caring for her parents, younger brothers and sisters. She could even be the owner of great possessions.

The Buddha did not attach greater importance to the birth of a son. On one occasion when King Kosala was

with the Buddha, news was brought to the King of the birth of a daughter to him. Expecting a son, the King was displeased. Noticing this, the Buddha paid a glowing tribute to women, delineating their virtues in the following manner:-

“Some women are indeed better (than men).
Bring her up, O Lord of men. There are women
who are wise, virtuous, who have high regard
for mother-in-law, and who are chaste.
To such noble wife may be born a valiant son,
a Lord of Realms, who will rule a kingdom.”

The Buddha opened the gates for the full participation of women in the field of religion by making them eligible for admission into the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* – the Order of Nuns. This opened new avenues of culture, social services and opportunities for public life to women. It led implicitly to the recognition of their importance to society, and in doing so enhanced the status of women.

Although there were some caustic comments made in the *Tripitaka* about women's wiles and behaviour, the Buddha also mentioned in the *Samyutta Nikaya* many of their redeeming features. It was said that under certain circumstances women are considered wiser and more discerning than men, and that they are also considered capable of attaining perfection or sainthood after treading the Noble Eightfold Path. Although some may sound unpleasant, through careful observation, we find

that what the Buddha said about women still holds good today. Thus, in revealing the nature of women, – as the Buddha did when King Kosala found that he had a daughter instead of a son – the Buddha pointed out not only their weaknesses but also their potential.

The Buddha clearly showed that women are capable of understanding His teachings and also to practise them to some degree of spiritual attainment. This is clearly indicated by the advice that the Buddha gave to different women on different occasions and circumstances. The Buddha taught the lesson of impermanence to the vain and beauty-conscious Khema. Khema was the beautiful consort of King Bimbisara. She was at first reluctant to see the Buddha because she had heard that the Buddha used to refer to external beauty in disparaging terms. One day, she paid a casual visit to the monastery just to enjoy the scenery of the place. Gradually, she was attracted to the hall where the Buddha was preaching. The Buddha, through the use of His psychic powers read her thoughts and created a vision of a young lady standing in front of her. Khema was admiring her beauty when the Buddha transformed the created beauty from youth to middle age and subsequently to old age, till it finally fell on the ground with broken teeth, grey hair and wrinkled skin. This transformation caused Khema to realise the vanity of external beauty and to appreciate the fleeting nature of life. She then pondered: 'Has such a body come to be wrecked like that? Then so will my body also.' With this realisation she subsequently attained Arahatsip

and with the King's consent, she entered the Order of Bhikkhuni.

To women who were unduly emotional and grief-stricken on the loss of their beloved ones, the Buddha spoke on the inevitability of death as enunciated in the Four Noble Truths. He also quoted various parables to emphasize His point. Thus, to Visakha, a deeply emotional and affectionate grandmother who had lost her granddaughter, the Buddha spoke as follows:—

“From affection springs grief,
From affection springs fear,
For one who is wholly free from affection,
There is no grief, much less fear.”

The establishment of the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* – the Order of Nuns – in the fifth year of the Buddha's ministry paved the way for full religious freedom for women. It was successful in the sense that there were many eminent nuns who were brilliant in the study and practice of the Dhamma. In the eyes of the world, Buddhism rose highly. The Psalms of the Sisters (*Therigatha*) which contains 77 verses by individual nuns is one of the prides of Buddhist literature.

The nuns were not restricted by the Buddha where the teaching and preaching of the Dhamma was concerned. The Bhikkhuni Order produced a remarkable number of brilliant preachers and exponents of the Dhamma like Sukha, Patacara, Khema, Dhammadinna

and Maha Pajapati (the foster mother to Siddharta). According to Buddhism, a son was not essential for the father's passage to heaven, daughters were as good as sons, with the liberty to lead an independent life. By granting women an active share in the religious life, the Buddha also helped to raise their status in secular life.

However, the admission of women into the religious life was too advanced for that period. Because of the nature of the improvement being too advanced in thinking for that particular era, people were unable to adapt themselves thus causing a regression. Hence the period of the *Bhikkhuni Sangha* was short-lived because the people failed to master the situation. The Brahmins who found their privilege in the caste system threatened was another factor which caused the decline of the Order. They issued hostile propaganda against this 'new' attitude of granting women religious freedom.

In Sri Lanka, the Order of Nuns flourished till 1017 A.D. in the reign of King Mahinda IV. After that it disappeared and was not revived. But the Order of Nuns was introduced into China by Sinhalese nuns, and it still exists there as well as in Japan today. However, in the Mahayana tradition they occupy a subordinate position which is by no means on par with the monks.

Towards Equality and Freedom

The advent of the modern era in the 19th and 20th century was a far cry from the days of the Buddha. Women's emancipation, their quest for freedom and

equality achieved tremendous strides particularly in the West. This came about as the result of modern trends and thinking, and modern education for women in all seats of higher learning.

Susan B. Anthony, an American pioneered the drive for the equality for women in 1848, more than 148 years ago. Since then, the movement and struggle, with wider objectives, had forged ahead under various pioneer women and women's organisations. These people believed that women had a rôle to play in patriotic fellowship with their menfolk in contributing to the building of a better world through a better society and country.

Since 1848, there were popular organised movements for equal educational opportunities, equal political rights and economic equality for women. In the West, the status of women was enhanced by conditions generated by the industrial revolution, humanitarian movements and women's movement for equality. But, in Asia and other countries which were not so industrially advanced, the changes were brought about by reformers with a strong religious background.

In the last fifty to sixty years there had been a steady increase in women's participation in the economic, social as well as the political life of their respective countries. Such success achieved by women recently in their respective fields – in social science, in business, in economics and even in the political field – can be described as phenomenal. Ironically, though some women had

reached the utmost in the political arena as Prime Ministers of their country, in certain other countries their contemporaries have yet to be given the franchise – their right to vote! Although most countries have now adopted fairer attitudes and have opened educational and career opportunities to women, the unpleasant experiences and discriminations that they have to put up with together with rivalries and fears are but part of the still prevailing attitudes. It is an understatement to say that certain forms of discrimination still exist against women.

International action to raise the status of women began in a small way with the now defunct League of Nations, shortly after the first World War. Subsequently the United Nations Charter went further to grant the principles of equality and freedom to all women. The Commission on the status of women, an organ of the United Nations, probed the question of discrimination based on sex and deliberated on questions pertaining to the political rights of women; equal pay for equal work; the status of women in common law; the nationality of married women; educational and economic opportunities for women; technical assistance and participation by women.

Though much had been accomplished through these women's suffragette movements and international organisations in relation to greater women's participation in the social, economic and political fields, the problem of real freedom has yet to be solved.

Freedom in the Buddhist Sense

Real freedom is that of being free from all forms of bondage. It can be achieved only through the proper spiritual development and purification of one's own mind – of cleansing oneself from all taints of greed, hatred and delusion. No amount of public debates, demonstrations and universal charters can bring full freedom. These can only be achieved through one's own diligence and heedfulness through regular practice of meditation as taught by the Buddha.

The Buddha, in promoting the cause of women was considered to be the first emancipator of women and was the promoter of a democratic way of life. It is in the Buddha-Dhamma that women were not despised and looked down upon but were given status with men in their spiritual endeavour to gain wisdom and liberation. ■